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Essere italiano: The Provenance of Vattimo

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Abstract: Vattimo's political liberalism often sits uncomfortably with his non-foundational commitments. The attempt to disentangle postmodern thought from moral relativism is seen as a disingenuous strategy: one either arbitrarily adopts liberal values or does so because it is part of our tradition, thus depending on the very metaphysical foundations which Vattimo denies to other thinkers. One answer may well be to distinguish metaphysics from ontology and show that Vattimo's justification of liberalism arises an oscillation between Heidegger and Nietzsche. However, the following article maintains that Vattimo's justification is often not properly understood because it is peculiarly Italian, seeking a plural account of truth derived from the human being's peculiar position as the imaginative creature.

Keywords: Gianni Vattimo; pluralism; Italian humanism; political liberalism; hermeneutics; imagination.

1. Introduction: Vattimo's political liberalism

Like most late modern mainland European thinkers, Gianni Vattimo is sceptical of the putative neutrality and independence of the Enlightenment model of reason. Yet, whereas this suspicion in many of his contemporaries engenders a nostalgic mourning of the overcoming of modern rational tropes and a tendency for irresponsible play, for him it gives birth to the possibility of emancipation. His original contribution to the field of philosophy arises from his attempt to reconstruct a rationality out of the recognition of the interpretative, hermeneutic understanding of truth. The aims of the following discussion are to offer a better understanding of Vattimo's thought, to resolve a theoretical problem in his own work and,

consequently, to offer a way out of a philosophical impasse about the nature and practicality of a more general philosophical idea. The general idea is the main concern of modernity. As Kant spurs one to do, one must only obey those edicts which can be rationalized and hence be one's own. Only in such a way can the oppression of others be resisted.ⁱ However, whereas modernity was concerned with legitimacy and reason, late modernity, when one is made aware that the universal reason of the Enlightenment itself is an interested, historical construction, is concerned with the relationship between legitimacy and power.

To understand Vattimo's philosophy is, then, to think through the problems of our tradition: "the finitude that characterizes all of us and that rules out any complete conquest of the opacity that every person bears."ⁱⁱ This finitude is initially understood as the weakening of the Enlightenment project. When one's state, one's family, one's managers or others in general command, ask or plead that the agent do something, she appeals to her conscience to ask whether there are good reasons, whether reason itself can validate the request. If so, then the agent acts according to his or her own will and is self-determined. The aim of the Enlightenment was to liberate one from arbitrary wills, superstitions and ideology; to be the age of criticism.ⁱⁱⁱ Freedom was conceived as the subject's independence from power. And liberalism as a political creed is the protection and maintenance of the independent subject because a system of rights, the political virtues of tolerance, equality and free thought and the institutions of public education and democratic participation allow for the free thinking and acting subject.

Vattimo is not a liberal in this sense, as he recognizes the cultural constructivism inherent in liberal reason: "But what is called "world" is an outcome not only of interpretation but also of history: it is the result of the interpretative processes of others. Just like the subject is not something primordial or original, neither is the world that is always given as the outcome of other interpretations."^{iv} As Vattimo has aged so his thought has

become ever more overtly political and ethical. He perhaps always believed that hermeneutics and phenomenology were political engagements, but from the turn of the century his thought has drifted away from the interpretation and the non-grounding of hermeneutics as the *koiné* to which all other philosophies are mere reflected ideologies and towards the application or the practical consequences of (broadly conceived) hermeneutics' philosophical preeminence.^v

One enlightening way to understand Vattimo's political position is to imagine him -- as he often does in his own writings -- in conversation with his contemporaries, Gadamer, Derrida, Rorty, Habermas and Apel, in order to differentiate himself in a negative sense of identification. He is not a pragmatist and not a proceduralist; nor is he a conservative, nor a relativist, although he does -- in a very Hegelian attitude -- find commonalities in all these positions. Vattimo's ethics and political philosophy arise out of his return and rejection of these possible positions.^{vi} Yet, as Hume once mentioned about an entirely different subject, no amount of negations will lead to a definition. One other way, then, to understand his position is in the positive relationship with his contemporaries and, here, one thinks most readily of John Rawls's political liberalism.^{vii} The characterization of hermeneutics as, if not first philosophy, then at least the cultural situatedness of the philosophical attitude often sounds much like political liberalism: "an ontology of the weakening of Being, supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one."^{viii} The values of liberty, tolerance, equality and the commitment to consensual agreement free of violence is, according to Vattimo, the only appropriate response to the fragmentation and the ungroundedness of postmetaphysical culture: "Equality is not a natural fact; it is precisely the opposite. Hence ensuring equality means replacing the law of nature with the law of reason, and that can only be grounded in free projectuality. And free projectuality needs consensus in order to take effect."^{ix} The

values that make possible a sincere interpretation of others and oneself regulate one's comportment to others and dovetail neatly with the values of political liberalism: tolerance, respect and reasonableness.

Hermeneutics is a political project because it is the awareness and the resistance of theoretical and practical violence: "Metaphysics is an aspect and a consequence of dominion, not its cause."^x Metaphysics is violent because it is the silencing of other groups; but, in this quotation, and one shall need to recall it later, Vattimo moves away from Heidegger's claim that metaphysics was an enframing that led to a power relationship between subjects. Here it is clearly stated that power is achieved through metaphysics rather than being a consequence of it. Just as the later Rawls brackets off the metaphysical violence of comprehensive doctrines because they impede consensual agreement, so Vattimo prioritizes the reasoning of weak nihilism: once one realizes that there is no interest-free view from nowhere, then one is liberated from the constraints of inauthentic existence.^{xi} Once the agent is aware of being situated in a culture characterized by weak ontology, then the commitment to the responsibility of interpretation and the need for a reflective relation between the historical subject and her tradition resolves itself into a position which shares many of the features of political liberalism. The responsibility of interpretation conditions the agent to behave in a specific way to avoid violence towards the other, but what is of interest is that those norms which determine the responsible behaviour of the agent coincide closely with the norms of advanced liberal communities.^{xii} It is the subject, rather than the comprehensive doctrine or representation of truth (the content of one's beliefs), that is or is not reasonable, and the grounding norm is one of political autonomy, that is, independence from any metaphysical or comprehensive doctrine. And the formal requirement of this norm is to treat others with respect, a normative commitment that coincides with the aspirations of modernity (the refusal

of blind obedience to authority) and liberalism (the values of liberty, equality, respect and tolerance).^{xiii}

Vattimo seemingly claims that respect, tolerance, liberty and equality are normative commitments for the subject who inhabits the fabric of postmetaphysical society. The hermeneutic subject is ethical because the norms which oblige her should guarantee the absence of violence: one must be able to step back, that is, not be coerced or irrevocably bound to one's tradition (liberty); one must recognize the finitude of one's position and that of others (tolerance); and one must recognize the right of all individuals to their own responsibly articulated and interpreted tradition (equality and respect).^{xiv} Vattimo is seemingly unapologetic in his affirmation of this new subjectivity:

The task of philosophy, once it is aware of the postmodern condition, consists in articulating this pre-comprehension; attempting, or better inventing, starting from this very condition (projecting) a guiding thread for choices and plans, from individual ethics to politics. In place of the nostalgic effort, characteristic of reactive nihilism, to go back to 'values,' it is a question of actively continuing the 'active nihilistic' work of the destruction of absolutes. For what reason? For an individual ethics or a political society explicitly grounded in the free choice of that which, of course always starting from the path where we already find ourselves, most certainly appears capable of liberating us from idols.^{xv}

The enlightenment call to be liberated from idols, from superstition, that is, from those beliefs specifically used for political manipulation, is consistently found at the heart of Vattimo's political project.

Vattimo agrees with John Rawls that the regulative ideal of political dialogue is consensus and not truth, implicitly insisting on the notion of the other as an equal participant in discourse unless he or she is unreasonable; postulating an ethics "of negotiation and consensus rather than an ethics of immutable principles or categorical imperatives speaking through the reason of everyone."^{xvi} It would seem that such an ethics promotes the central liberal values of liberty and equality. Whereas for Rawls such values are the product of a

historical tradition of radical scepticism and justified by an appeal to public reason and stability, they are for Vattimo inimical to postmetaphysical thought.^{xvii} The radical scepticism of the Anglo-American tradition grounds political liberalism and its purely political values in that attitude of the agnostic sceptic: as a culture, we have been wrong about our comprehensive and metaphysical commitments in the past and should assume we are probably wrong now, so we cannot use them as a basis for legislation and interference in others' lives. The "agnosticism" grounds a distinctive Popperian liberalism where institutions and laws are the product of a slow trial and error methodology in order to keep authoritarianism at bay.^{xviii} For the Rawlsian tradition, as with most Anglo-American liberalism, it is not that there may not be some truth of the good life, it is just that we are unlikely ever to fully conceive it. For Vattimo, the notion of truth itself is always already perspectival and interest-determined and thus he is an "atheist" with regard to the idea that there is but one truth waiting to be apprehended one day. The major difference is that Vattimo cannot, as North Atlantic liberalism does, base "the claims [he] makes on equality; instead the reduction of violence has to provide the basis."^{xix} Equality as a value is either formal, but if so cannot override my historical commitments and comprehensive goods without coercion (as Hegel often puts it, the agent would do what reason demands in spite of herself); or equality can be substantial, but then it is metaphysical or comprehensive.

If one is to discern a difference, then it is that Rawls's political liberalism is top-down, imposing the values of liberalism on pluralism in order to resolve conflict; whereas Vattimo's ethics of interpretation is bottom-up, positing the values of political liberalism as the consequence of the multiplication of worldviews. Rawls's political liberalism only works if the values of the public sphere just happen to coincide with the comprehensive commitments of the agent.^{xx} Contrastingly, Vattimo's commitment to the historicity of the culture of postmetaphysical thought affirms the values of political liberalism as a

consequence of the actual culture we live in, and hence they will, even if contingently, coincide with the agent's own commitments: "The heeding of our heritage does not, therefore, lead only to the devaluation of all values, but also to the reprise and continuation of certain inherited contents."^{xxi} The difference will become marked as one understands the real disagreement between their views on stability: for Rawls it is necessary for social cooperation, for Vattimo stability is violence.^{xxii} Vattimo is, however, perhaps too conservative: the agent's first obligation is to the tradition from which she speaks and, at times, his position is in danger of being nothing but a sociological description of postmodern society rather than a normative prescription of certain ethical values. The subject for Vattimo must listen to her tradition and be responsible in her interpretation of it, yet the values conferred on her cannot play the role of legitimation in a plural society. Rawls's own formal rationalism is required by any contextual politics since, by divorcing the political subject who – in a sense – is autonomous and privileged in the activity of political discourse from the particular subject, he ensures that the social thesis does not undermine the normative aims of dialogue and consequently refuses blind obedience to authority. Vattimo suffers from the looming presence of authoritarianism, as his defences of Heidegger's postwar silence seem to suggest.^{xxiii}

The concern remains that this approach has ceded too much to political liberalism and that its values are relevant only to a specific society, that is, the society characterized by value pluralism. One can exhort fellow members of one's community to be liberal or lose their right to participate in dialogue because we share a pluralist culture, but when these values are used to criticize a monist society, a theocracy for example, then they have no more power than the monists' demand on us. The problem can be more readily expressed. Vattimo's political liberalism, as expressed in his ethical and political writings, often sits uncomfortably with his non-foundational commitments. The attempt to disentangle

postmodern thought from moral relativism is often seen as a disingenuous strategy: one either arbitrarily adopts liberal values (liberty, tolerance, equality respect) or does so because it is part of our tradition: “A philosophy that relies on a plurality of interpretations must avoid not only any metaphysical claims to universal values, which would restrict personal developments, but also that passive, conservative nature that characterizes descriptive philosophies in favor of action.”^{xxiv} The problem of the oscillation between tradition and reasons manifests itself in political and ethical concerns which are the main concern here, but also in a more general worry about the idea of hermeneutics as *koiné*. Valgenti sees the problem as inimical to hermeneutics in general and already present in Vattimo’s mentor Pareyson: “if we take interpretation as the point of departure, we risk proposing easy philosophical solutions, ones that do not problematize philosophy itself, but fall into dogmatism or skepticism, ideology or relativism. In Kant’s view, common sense is merely appropriate for experience, while reason is the toll of speculation.”^{xxv} Readers of Vattimo suspect his position depends on the very metaphysical foundations which he denies to other thinkers. The strength of liberal Enlightenment thought is its universality. If it becomes communitarian or aware of its own tradition, it loses faith in its universality. If it, however, putatively assumes its universality and superiority, it becomes a comprehensive doctrine or a metaphysical system, and commits violence on those who would choose not to endorse its rules. (Unless it is true, which it cannot be because of the end of metaphysics.) For Vattimo, the imperative to situate oneself in relation to one’s provenance, to heed one’s heritage, does not distance one from it, but makes the subject aware of “inherited contents” that are necessary for a sense of objectivity through the rationality of constructed discourse. It is this oscillation between communitarianism, belonging to a community of late modern, enfeebled subjects, and the avowal of the universal need to resist violence which echoes the problem of political liberalism.

The possible solution may be a return to the idea of provenance and tradition. One naturally assumes that the opacity of Vattimo himself is the French-German philosophical tradition, which is geographically close to Northern Italy and dominant in his own education and writings. However, there is also the opacity of being Italian, a provenance which is often forgotten and yet, perhaps, crucial in understanding his own unique contribution to the politics and ethics of our time. The present discussion aims to show how this forgotten heritage is significant and how it might reveal the distinctiveness of Vattimo's contribution to contemporary thought.

2. Provenance 1: the philosophical origins of Vattimo's thought as a possible indication of a solution

It is supposed that the philosophical provenance of Vattimo is the German post-Heideggerian tradition of hermeneutics, initially through the influence of Pareyson and then through the teaching of Gadamer. Where Vattimo differs from the Heidegger explicitly is over the reintegration of Nietzsche into the postmetaphysical fold. The importance of tradition is, of course, to be found in his oscillation account of practical reason.^{xxvi} Late modern culture makes stark the interested and pragmatic nature of "truth" as the Nietzschean account of ideology. The authentic subject must be able to recognize the historical nature and interest conditions of a particular presentation of the "truth" and stand back from it. However, the subject should simultaneously be aware that without the givenness of one's tradition, one has no language whatsoever through which to interpret at all:

At a time when, thanks to the Christianity that has permeated the history of our institutions as well as the history of our culture more generally, we have come to realize that the experience of truth is above all that of hearing and interpreting messages (even in the "hard sciences" there are paradigms, preunderstandings that we receive as messages), the Christian revelation has

cogency insofar as we recognize that without it our historical existence would not make sense. The example of the “classics” of a literature, a language, a culture is illuminating here. Just as western literature would not be thinkable without its Homeric poems, without Shakespeare and Dante, our culture in its broadest sense would not make sense if we were to remove Christianity from it.^{xxvii}

The sense of objectivity in reasoning emerges from the conversation with one’s tradition, otherwise the irony will be arbitrary and unintelligible. One can only be ironic with others and on the basis of shared expectations. It is when those expectations take on the veneer of natural right or absolute truth that the irony is persecuted. The subject oscillates between the transcendental refusal of the truth of the worldview (Nietzsche’s irony) yet returns to it as the framework and language through which to move beyond it (Heidegger’s conservatism). The “German” provenance or heritage of his thought opens up one obvious path to overcome the problem at the heart of Vattimo’s political liberalism.

Nietzsche’s ironic exhortation to continue to dream knowing one is dreaming is to reconstruct the enlightenment subject as a playful, comic interpreter of the current actuality. The stance of the agent who would enter into dialogue is what Vattimo calls weakly nihilist: the frameworks and languages of the comprehensive doctrines we bring to the negotiating table are known to be partial and interest-driven, and, with this knowledge, comes the refusal to impose them on others, especially in using violence. Knowing that what one would promote as worthwhile and valuable is merely an expression of one’s own desires, preferences and cultural heritage has the consequence of weakening one’s own commitment to it and, instead, seeing the values of tolerance, respect and liberty of others as entailed by the interpretative stance. Violence arises from the belief that one’s truth is the whole truth, the one and only way to live, and one does a disservice to the other in order to make them live according to one’s values and edicts. Metaphysical comprehensive beliefs -- those characterized by monism, the belief that there is only one true description of ethical and

epistemological reality -- are violent because they seek to silence the inherent pluralism of our experience, a pluralism which given the social and cultural conditions of late modernity is more apparent than ever. Weak nihilism seems to be the equivalent of Rawls's step back from the metaphysical nature of comprehensive beliefs.

The problem is that philosophically one may well be convinced that truth and ethical value is never more than an interpretation and be unwilling to impose it on others. However, it is once more akin to Hume's rebuttal of scepticism in that one must still have commitments and beliefs to function day to day in the world. One cannot be ironic towards beliefs to such an extent that one is cynical and that means committing oneself to one set of values over others. Of course, for Vattimo, such a commitment is not a problem so long as the set of beliefs one commits to are not metaphysical or, to put it another way, the beliefs are consistent with the liberal values that make ironic interpretation rather than truth-saying possible. Just as Rawls's own political liberalism rules out only unreasonable doctrines and unreasonable doctrines are those which violate the liberal principles of political liberalism, so irresponsible interpretations are those which transgress liberal principles. One finds in both thinkers a prioritization of a special type of reasoning subject: the liberal, tolerant, egalitarian self.^{xxviii} Such a subject is privileged because it is the best way to generate agreement in politics. Political liberalism either becomes a form of pragmatism and cannot criticize hegemonic, tyrannical states which are stable or it remains reliant on a metaphysical account of human nature and hence is violent and exclusionary of other worldviews.

One answer may well be to distinguish metaphysics from ontology and show that Vattimo's justification of liberalism arises from his philosophical context, the original oscillation between Heidegger and Nietzsche. The tension between the quietism of the former and the radical overcoming of the latter, however, remains uncomfortable given Heidegger's own description of Nietzsche as the last metaphysician; as Vattimo reminds us, Nietzsche still

has the will to proclaim truths.^{xxix} So the Nietzschean ironic stance, in isolation, may well be the very metaphysical mistake of Rawls, to posit a political subject who is prior to the situated subject. Vattimo tells us that the oscillation is “making oneself aware of the paradigm into which one has been thrown yet suspending its claim to definitive validity and heeding Being as that which remains unsaid.”^{xxx} So, we remain ironic to the immediate claims of our position, but simultaneously acknowledge that our situation is not false, measured against some unknowable, unreachable realm, but remains the event of truth and the interpretation of it.

The distinction between the subject conceived ontologically and the subject conceived metaphysically (which would be Vattimo’s accusation against Rawls) depends for a large part on his use of Foucault’s phrase the “ontology of actuality.”^{xxxi} It is his understanding of Heidegger’s edict to recollect Being as a response to the fragmentation of experience and reality in modernity and the specialization of discourses of knowledge leading to the death of philosophy. One must remember that Being is not but happens:

What it [recollecting thought] is listening to in its effort of recollection is not just the voices of some archaic primordial mystery, supposedly drowned out by the vertiginous becoming of modernity; there is no origin located somewhere outside the actuality of the event. The event has its own thickness and certainly bears within it the traces of the past, but it is just as much composed of the voices of the present. And the past itself is something to which we gain access only through the part of it preserved down to us, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*.^{xxxii}

The most enlightening characterization of the ontology of actuality comes from the identification of it as hermeneutics understood as the Hegelian spirit of our time: “Defined as the ontology of the actuality, philosophy is practiced [*sic*] as an interpretation of the epoch, a giving-form to widely felt sentiments about the meaning of being alive in a certain society and in a certain historical world.”^{xxxiii} The actuality of one’s situation and tradition is the

fragmentation, pluralism and loss of authority characteristic of our time, and the ontology of this epoch is not a mere descriptive sociology but the thinking which is appropriate to and a product of this time (how does one think when there are no certainties -- hermeneutically and ironically -- Being's thought?) as well as the philosophical thinking of our present situation, what there is (the thought of Being). Interpretation and the realization that "facts are interpretations" is the only "fact" is only a possibility if one lives in a peculiar time of crisis. Since knowing that facts are interpretations relies on a specific social and epistemological crisis and that one response to this is the violent attempt to reimpose hegemonic understandings, even if different from those that have been lost, then emancipation will also be extinguished. Metaphysics, to repeat, is the symptom of violence and not its cause. The aim of hermeneutics as a practical philosophy seems, then, to be to resist power, to resist hegemony and to resist stability. Contrary to other forms of political liberalism, stability is violence and instability is peace.

However, such a distinction between metaphysics and ontology, though compelling, does not overcome the problem at the heart of political liberalism without further elucidation. Stephen White, for one, agrees that ontological weakening might seem to be a solution, for as White himself stresses: "the current turn might now be seen as an attempt to think ourselves, and being in general, in ways that depart from the dominant -- but now more problematic -- ontological investments of modernity."^{xxxiv} However, he is also quick to voice a suspicion of the distinction between metaphysics and ontology, hypothesizing that theoretically conventional entities in our discourses are not overcome by the "ontological turn" and immediately identifies one of the major entities as the coherent, rational, enlightened subject.^{xxxv} Vattimo's ethical guidelines to appropriate interpretation seemingly reiterate enfeebled liberal tropes. White recognizes this as a general trend in postmodern thought,

adding in a footnote, “The potential, ironic danger here is that the former image of subjectivity comes to look uncomfortably like the latter.”^{xxxvi}

The problem with the ontology route is once again implicit in White’s concern: the idea that under it all is a metaphysics of history which determines the opening, destiny and overcoming of modernity. Only at the end of history, in late modernity, is the proper comportment to generate a responsible interpretation possible. Not only is such an ontology controversial; it is akin to a metaphysics and, once more, for political liberalism, it begins to sound like a comprehensive doctrine grounds the putative neutrality of the political, negotiating agent in conversation. White’s reading is sometimes at odds with Vattimo’s own avowed understanding of the modern subject.^{xxxvii} However, the debate seems to centre on the understanding of the philosophy of history in play and that is pertinent, whether such a philosophy of history is Hegelian (as White seems to assume but does not assert) or nihilistic (as Vattimo repeatedly states). Vattimo is at pains to differentiate his ontology of the present from a “mere” sociology through the elaboration of the philosophical attitude (and hence practice) par excellence of non-foundationalism. The assumptions of a theory are not tests to be either proven or rejected against some standard of human emancipation. Instead the situation is an understanding and hence an event of Being, yet it remains contingent on the unfolding destiny of an admittedly weakened philosophy of history. The postulation of a philosophy of history as White characterizes it, though, remains too Heideggerian (how metaphysics brings about oppression via the subject-object distinction) and not at all Italian. Vattimo is not interested in the destiny of knowledge, value and the human; his thinking exists in the cracks and crises of thought. His pluralism is an event which needs to be sustained and maintained by an active politically liberal engagement, otherwise we fall once more into the violence of authoritarianism, tyranny and metaphysics.

Vattimo's political liberalism and his ethics of interpretation are possible as a consequence of the disorientation of the subject brought about by a fragmentation and secularization of culture. The subject is the product of a culture in crisis. On the one hand, the ethics of interpretation is a contingent response to a particular historical epoch or event, that is, it just happens to be the case that we live in a culture in crisis and hence we are weakly rational. Political liberalism on such a reading is communitarian and dependent on the social thesis; it is not privileged above other homogenous cultures or historically prior cultures, but remains just an event or opening of thinking appropriate to our own contingent time. Such a reading, though, is at odds with Vattimo's affirmation that the end of metaphysics is to be understood as emancipation.^{xxxviii} On the other hand, political liberalism and the ontology of actuality are a destiny and are privileged as a better way of understanding, hence progress over other cultures. Yet, if this is so, Vattimo requires a proof of the metaphysical theory of history and he falls to White's criticism of his weak ontology.

There is an alternative. Vattimo could be understood as the philosopher of crisis because of his Italian provenance whereby pluralism is contingent and accidental (contrary to White's accusation) but to be maintained and supported because of weakly universal norms (contrary to relativism). There is a missing jigsaw piece in Vattimo's picture that would perhaps complete the picture. It hinges on his pluralism which is at odds with Heidegger's own "historical-destinal"^{xxxix} narrative and not a response to the brute fact of multiculturalism as it is with most of the radical sceptics of the Anglo-american liberal tradition. White's concern with the weak ontology of Vattimo make sense if Vattimo is Heideggerian through and through. For Heidegger's conservatism and quietism asserts itself as a monism: the event of Being is epochal, it is given as a tradition. But Vattimo is a pluralist: the event of Being is also events of Being; the comprehensive doctrines which inform the agent's reasoning are not singular in each agent, but overlap in a particular postmodern subjectivity; the agent does not

inherit a situation, a tradition, but situations and traditions, and is always already disorientated:

if there are no first supreme, universal principles, the only imperatives that would seem to count are those imposed by specific situations, but right here is where the difference looms between a postmetaphysical ethics and relativism pure and simple (assuming that there could ever be such a thing): the contestation that the credibility of first principles has evaporated does not translate into the assumption of our historical condition and of our belonging to a community as the only absolute.^{x1}

Provenance 2: essere italiano

Vattimo's justification of his political liberalism is often not properly understood because it is peculiarly Italian and belongs to a tradition of thinking which is often ignored by other European interpreters. Vattimo belongs to Italian thought which, ever since the emergence of humanism, sought a pluralist account of understanding derived from the human being's peculiar existence as the imaginative creature. One analogous way to understand what is Italian about Vattimo is to think about the liberal norm of neutrality. For an Englishman such as myself, the aim of newscasters, of those who supply us with information, is the BBC model of neutrality: to present the truth in a disinterested way. Anglo-American political liberalism grows from the Popperian stance that such neutrality will only be the product of a trial-and-error progress towards some regulative future. In Rawls's political liberal stance, the content of one's comprehensive doctrines is to be left at the door of the negotiating room and politely not spoken of in negotiation, as though one can distance oneself from one's identity comfortably and without consequence. Such neutrality has always been a myth for Italian culture, as exemplified in the constitution of the RAI (public broadcast) channels which all transparently avow their interest from the beginning: conservative, Christian or left wing. The information supplied is to be taken as an expression

of that perspective. Vattimo's perspectivism is perhaps theoretically Nietzschean, but it is substantially Italian through and through: "There is no experience of truth that is not interpretation; I know nothing unless it interest me, but if it interests me, evidently I don't gaze upon it in a disinterested fashion."^{xli} This differentiates his perspectival pluralism from Rawls's radical scepticism or Popperian liberalism. It also differentiates him, contrary to White's assumptions, from Heidegger's monism about the philosophy of history. If comprehensive doctrines are beyond proof or reflection, then -- so long as they are reasonable -- one affords equal respect to them, whether this be sympathy or indifference. They cannot be silenced as that amounts to the violence of metaphysics. To understand why, a little more needs to be said about his Italian provenance.

Although the worry of generalization to the point of vacuity looms large, to understand the *italianismo* of Vattimo, a few rather unsubstantiated claims need to be made and exceptions (for example, Galileo) need to be sidestepped. Just as the British philosophical tradition is predominantly empiricist in tenor, the French rationalist and the German idealist, a guiding thread throughout Italian thought -- from its inception with the recognition of the popular language as apart from the official status of Latin, and the emergence of an Italian country distinguished from the declining, imperial religious state that was Rome -- Italian thought has always been pluralist in tenor. From the Italian humanists to the culmination in Vico, and continuing as an ever present shadow even in the Hegelian Croce and the Marxist Gramsci, pluralism remains a given in Italian thought.^{xlii}

There is a story to be told in the history of thought about a possible world where the bifurcation which occurs as the dominance of the Church and its moral authority begins to decline, as the pluralism of thought engendered by the provision of education for non-clerical students and the rediscovery of ancient texts by a new middle class of leisure seekers, does not -- after a crisis period -- resolve itself into the stability and authority of natural science

based on the philosophical methods of Galileo, Newton and Descartes. For Vattimo, contrary to Heidegger, it is dominion which establishes monism and not the other way around:

“Metaphysics is an aspect and a consequence of dominion, not its cause.”^{xliii} Italian

Humanism was explicitly an educational programme rather than a philosophical school, but it was the voice of this crisis. Just as the postmodern world is one of declining moral authority, the demystification of grand narratives and metaphysical pictures, so too was the world that gave birth to Italian thought.^{xliv} It is a pertinent and plausible investigation to ask whether there exists a strain of humanism which remains in European thought and acts as a shadow, moving underneath the dominant positivisms of both empiricism and rationalism, and that such a thread can be traced as a geographical centre in the Italian tradition above all others. If so, it is worth thinking that Vattimo’s own thought is the product of this tradition, and owes its provenance as much to it as to the acquired German and French thought in which he immersed himself.

Humanism was the movement from the late mediaeval world to the early modern world. The idea of the humanists of the Italian renaissance was one of the reorientation of knowledge away from the abstractness of logic, metaphysics and theology, to the proper study of man. One can list the main proponents of Italian humanism as early pluralists: Mussato and his poetic form of knowledge that seeks the particular, historical appearance of a thing and not “truth” as a universal object; Boccaccio’s theory of poetic expression; Salutati’s theory of truth as an historical manifestation of the human world; and, of course, Pico della Mirandola’s ethical interpretive pluralism.^{xlv} One could even include the obvious example of Machiavelli^{xlvi} at the end of humanism with his normative discursive pluralism and pragmatism about truth. And such a tradition culminates much later with a significant figure. Just as the arch-rationalist is French and the arch-empiricist British, so the arch pluralist is Italian: Vico.^{xlvii} He sent his *New Science* to Isaac Newton confident that, just as Newton’s

work was the theoretical foundations of natural science, he was presenting the theoretical foundations of social science: the sciences of the human being, of intentions and of social existence. His *verum-factum* principle and the “conceit of scholars” deny metaphysics and monism and also affirm an historicity, and, once again, the faculty of imagination (imagining one is an agent in a different culture) underpins an interpretative account of truth.

Let us begin with some implicit claims common to the tradition of Italian humanism and their obvious parallels implicit in the general timbre of Vattimo’s thought. First, for Italian humanism, the interested human being is the central concept for all knowledge claims, systems of thought and ethical values in the sense of both determining what is to count as knowledge and why truth matters. For Vattimo, weak ontology is the recognition that all values and items of knowledge are from the situated perspective of the historical human being. Moreover, the aims of interpretation as we have seen are enlightenment: the humble Kant or the twilight of the idols for the purpose of emancipation. Second, the Italian tradition constantly reaffirms that imagination as a faculty of knowing is essential to the human being who is understood as an interpretative being. For Vattimo, the capacity to interpret, to imaginatively respond to the world, is the sign of accepting one’s nihilistic destiny. One need only think of his interpretation of Nietzsche’s Overman as an aesthetic, ironic stance, a self-creation that takes joy in its own creation. Finally, the commitment to the different discourses of knowledge, none of which can be privileged over the others, is an obvious parallel to Vattimo’s pluralism and its inherent tolerance of difference: “The real enemy of liberty is the person who thinks she can and should preach final and definitive truth.”^{xlvi}

Whether or not Vattimo is a true representative of the Italian tradition, or whether such a tradition exists at all, is a large interpretative question which, here, can only be assumed. If the work were to be carried out, it would be first pertinent to discern the value of such an enterprise. The answer to that is that the Italian tradition offers a possible solution to

the problem at the heart of Vattimo's (and others') political liberalism. Either political liberalism is a response to a specific pluralistic and fragmented social existence, and hence just another event of Being like other epochs and cultures (meaning, the values of tolerance, liberty, equality etc. are, *for us*, appropriate norms of behaviour but not necessarily for other cultures), or the values of liberalism are privileged above all other values, though this seems to depend on the very metaphysical foundations which Vattimo denies.

The Italian tradition affirms pluralism and fragmentation for a different reason: it is a privileged social fabric and makes possible the interpretative, imaginative knower. The reason for this is contained in the overt rejection of Hegelian or Burkean conservatism and its fear of the instability of revolution.^{xlix} Even in Rawls, the ultimate justification of political liberalism, if not a *modus vivendi*, is as the best way to avert the ever present danger of instability. Instability in all these thinkers is equated with, or is the possibility of, violence. One feels that in the Italian tradition, born in the shadow of the homogeneity of an imperial religious theodicy, it is very different. The violence of tyranny is equated with stability and there is a need to resist the restructuring of social existence back once again into stability. Again the pertinence of these words is paramount: "Metaphysics is an aspect and a consequence of dominion, not its cause."^l Stability is then a difference from Rawls because violence is the drive to impose homogeneity and not the reaction to instability. The homogeneity that encroaches is for Vattimo neoliberal capitalism. Traditional communism and Marxism fail to resist the dominance of capitalism because they remain trapped in a metaphysical understanding, but Vattimo's own position draws "attention to a current lack of emergency, that is, the increasing homologizing of the political, economic, and social structures of power."^{li} For Vattimo violence is to be averted by the maintenance and encouragement of a society of fragmentation and instability. Vattimo, like most Italian thinkers, is a philosopher of crisis: "If, as many signs appear to suggest, there is a widespread

tendency in the modern world to react to Babel and postmodern pluralism by recuperating strong identities (ethnicity, religion, and class, even lobbies and political cliques of various kinds), the philosophy of decline furnishes no arguments for worshipping these rediscovered and closely bounded identities -- or for deconstructing all of them from some lofty standpoint either.”^{lii}

Conclusion

Vattimo’s political liberalism does not rest, as White supposes, on the return of a metaphysical subjectivity or some hidden strong philosophy of history. The subject of Vattimo’s thought is the interpretative process demanded by the social existence of fragmentation and pluralism. However, neither is such a position merely the appropriate response to our culture milieu. Vattimo, like the Italian tradition itself, sees the refusal of violence as emancipation of thinking and yet does not seek the minimization of violence in stability since this is a return of homogeneity and tyranny: “While descriptive impositions desire to acquire power by pretending to become identical with the object of knowledge, hermeneutics instead struggles for conflicts of interpretations, that is, against the conservation of natural laws, values, and principles.”^{liii} Violence is not just the return of metaphysics but also the homogenization of social existence. The justification of the subject is then privileged but it is liberalism by proxy since the best way to support perspectival pluralism is by the adoption of interpretative behaviour regulated by plural values. Of course, the parallels between the crisis in history, the event of change, beginning in the fifteenth century, and the events of today are obvious: loss of moral authority, defragmentation, social incoherence, rise of pluralism and so on. More importantly, Vattimo, unlike his predecessors, sees in technology the ability to refuse hegemony: “The fact is that both Heidegger and Adorno never escaped from a vision of technology dominated by the model of the motor and

mechanical energy, so for them modern technology could do nothing except bring about a society subordinated to a central power dispatching commands to a purely passive periphery, as gear wheels are driven, whether these commands were mechanical impulses, political propaganda, or commercial advertising.”^{liv} Whoever controls communication and language controls social organization, but in the global, digital world, the centralization of language as one dominant language is more difficult. He continues: “The technology that does actually give us a glimpse of a possible dissolution of the rigid distinction between subject and object is not the mechanical technology of the motor, with its one-way flow from the center to the periphery, but it might very well be the technology of modern communications, the means by which information is gathered, ordered, and disseminated.”^{lv} These technologies make a crystalline actual act of interpretation. The digital world is not given and received in a causal relationship like the receiving of a postal letter that then becomes a cause of change in the agent. Data is always transmitted and coded. As agents, we know this and we must be prepared to understand the information as an embodied aspect of agents’ interests and conventions, recoding it as it passes through us not moving us.^{lvi} Vattimo explicitly sees the overcoming of metaphysics as an emancipation or liberation conceived of as overcoming alienation in terms of existing in a state of crisis or emergency because such a state engenders scepticism towards claims of right and justice in any absolutist sense.^{lvii}

There is, of course, an obvious problem. Vattimo mentions Galileo, Machiavelli, Vico, Gentile and Gramsci, but never in more than in passing, no more than a philosopher aware of his European tradition would do. He does devote more to Croce, but mostly in relation to that thinker’s own German inheritance from Hegel and in relation to Vattimo’s predecessor Gadamer.^{lviii} The question is in what way Vattimo can be considered as a continuation of this tradition. One could reasonably reject that it is absurd to assert that by not mentioning the

Italian tradition, Vattimo affirms it. It is difficult to conceive of what the falsification of this thesis would be. If he mentioned it, he is Italian; if he does not, he is Italian. One answer is a thoroughgoing interpretation of his thought from the first to the last, but such an enterprise demands a monograph, not a brief article.^{lix}

There is another justification to be found in some odd comments made by Nietzsche.^{lx} Just as the Americanness of Americans has little to do with geography and race and everything to do with the ethos they live in, are thrown into, so Vattimo is Italian by a process of cultural osmosis.^{lxi} To be Italian in the sense alluded to here is to base politics in resistance and not agreement. Tellingly, Vattimo is one of the few who has read Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and, of that set, one of the few who praises the Frenchman's account of group praxis as the real emancipatory moment. A time of crisis is expressed in fragmentation, oscillation and disorientation. The time of Italian humanism was a time of crisis when epistemic, moral and political authorities were weakened. Now, our moment, too, is a crisis. Crises are glimpses of the event of Being: how what becomes what it is, before it is. Italian humanism arose from the weakening of the Church's hegemonic power engendered by the concatenation of the rise of the commercial class and the nation state, the loss of papal moral authority, the privatization of education, the growth of individualism, reforming movements and the emergence of natural science as a new explanation of reality. The Church did not, of course, disappear but its "natural" right to rule and describe reality was enfeebled. In our own time, the metaphysics of correspondence is equally in crisis due to the explosion of the consuming class, dissolution of the nation state, the loss of science's moral authority, the commercialization of education, the suspicion of individualism, cultural difference movements and the "schools of suspicion" which undermine the privilege, based on claims to the objectivity or universality, of one discourse over others. The enfeebling of realism as the correct and only description of reality weakens its own "natural" right to found ethical and

political dictates. Vattimo belongs to a culture that expounds a philosophy of crisis. In *Hermeneutic Communism*, Luther, Freud and Kuhn are all identified as voices of crises in hegemonic thought and so as historical possibilities for emancipation. In the same book, he talks about the rejection of Sartre's "desperate vision" when the groups which emerge in a time of crisis (at time for Sartre which is the time of the necessity of impossibility) inevitably become hegemonic in response to the determinism of social power in favour of the maintenance and preservation of the instability of crisis itself through the pluralism of hermeneutic understanding.

So, for Vattimo, like many Italians the crisis is what is to be celebrated and not overcome; it is to be sustained and encouraged. Crisis is what gives us our freedom before the masquerade of metaphysics as the face of power closes it down. Only an Italian and not a German could write such a thing, if one can forgive such lazy stereotypes.

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ⁱ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" *Political Writings*, trans. H. Barry Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

ⁱⁱ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, trans. W. McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), A x fn.

^{iv} Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism from Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 93. I am aware that this text was co-authored, with Santiago Zabala, but here I do not have the luxury to consider the interpretative question of authorship and ownership.

^v See Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, ch. 3, and also Robert Valgenti's foreword in Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), where Vattimo's youthful political engagement is posited as the motivating factor in his philosophical vocation and his engagement with Pareyson. See Valgenti, "The Primacy of Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson's Hermeneutics of Common Sense." *Philosophy Today* 49(4) (2005): 333-41, who discusses the problematic vision of hermeneutics as *koiné*.

^{vi} Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. D. Webb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), ch. 8; Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), ch. 3; Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, part 1; Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, ch. 3; David

Rose, "The Ethical Claims of Il Pensiero Debole: Gianni Vattimo, Pluralism and Postmodern Subjectivity." *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 7(3) (2002): 63-78.

vii John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) ; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.) I have already discussed these interconnections and the political liberalism of Vattimo's position, although in those earlier discussions the direction of travel was in the opposite direction in order to throw light on Rawls's own historicity, see David Rose, "Postmodern Political Values: Pluralism and Legitimacy in the Thought of John Rawls and Gianni Vattimo." *Contemporary Political Theory* 7(4) (2008): 416-33, and David Rose, *Free Will and Continental Philosophy: The Death without Meaning* (London: Continuum, 2009), ch. 6. Vattimo himself, on pages 55-56 of *Nihilism & Emancipation*, hints at a certain concatenation between his own nonfoundationalism and the "reasonableness" of the later Rawls. One might reasonably ask how the avowed communism of *Hermeneutic Communism* relates to the claim that Vattimo is politically liberal. The answer to that is threefold: (i) the communism he proposes is largely economic in opposition to capitalism; (ii) communism understood as Marxism is always understood as a metaphysical system; and (iii) given i and ii, there is no inconsistency between the position he sets out there, especially his rejection of framed democracy and its "realist" liberalism, and the political liberalism here.

viii Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 19; see also 91-92.

ix Ibid., 107.

x Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 12.

xi Rose, "The Ethical Claims of Il Pensiero Debole."

xii Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, ch. 3; Rose, "Postmodern Political Values".

xiii Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, ch. 7.

xiv Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, ch. 3.

xv Gianni Vattimo, "Postmodernity and (the end of) metaphysics." *Postmodernism. What Moment?* ed. P. Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 37. See also Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 75.

xvi Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 67.

xvii John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), §11.1.

xviii Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, ch.1.

xix Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 98.

xx Jean Hampton. "Should Political Philosophy Be Done without Metaphysics?" *Ethics* 99(4) (1989): 791-814; Peter Steinberger, "The Impossibility of a 'Political' Consensus," *The Journal of Politics* 62(1) (2000): 147-65; Leif Wenar, "Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique," *Ethics* 106(1) (1995): 32-62.

xxi Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 97.

xxii John Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," in *Collected Papers* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), ch. 20.

xxiii Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 100-112.

xxiv Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 77.

xxv Valgenti, "The Primacy of Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson's Hermeneutics of Common Sense," 336.

xxvi Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, ch. 4.

xxvii Gianni Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation," in R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, & S. Zabala, *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 52-53.

xxviii John Rawls, "The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus," in *Collected Papers* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), X.

xxix Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 23.

^{xxx} Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 32.

^{xxxi} Gianni Vattimo, "Ontologia dell'attualità," *Filosofia* '87 (Rome: Laterza, 1988), 201-223; *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 86-89; *A Farewell to Truth*, 22-32.

^{xxxii} Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 87.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, 87-88.

^{xxxiv} Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, 4.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 6, fn. 8. See also Stephen White, "Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity." *Political Theory*, 37(6) (2009): 808-16, where he seems to reiterate and also enlarge this criticism explicitly to Vattimo albeit via the interpretation offered by Ted Miller ["The Two Deaths of Lady Macduff: Antimetaphysics, Violence, and William Davenant's Restoration Revision of Macbeth," *Political Theory* 3(6) (2008): 856-82] of White's own position, elaborated in the latter's earlier book, *Sustaining Affirmation*. See Miller's response: Ted Miller, "In Hermeneutic Circles: A Reply to White," *Political Theory* 37(6) (2009): 817-22. What seems to be at stake in the debate is not actually the coherence of Vattimo's position, but the status of weak ontology as a political practice. Ideally, the present article will open a new conversation on this front.

^{xxxvii} Vattimo's denial of the primacy of the subject or even a philosophy of history is quite stark on pages 12 and 50 of *Nihilism & Emancipation*, even if we have a contradictory set of assertions on p. 94 in the same volume of collected essays. The most telling discussion, though, is in Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 50-57, where Vattimo attacks the individualism of liberalism as supported by the subjectivity of the metaphysical 'I.'

^{xxxviii} Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 100-112.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.*, 103.

^{xl} *Ibid.*, 93.

^{xli} *Ibid.*, 63.

^{xlii} Should I offer references to the text that support my claim about, for example, Croce's liberalism by default even given his Hegelian system? There is a monograph in the above claims and I leave them hanging as controversial hostages to fortune, deliberately waiting for a debate to begin. Apologies to those of you with purer academic discipline.

^{xliii} Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 12.

^{xliv} As these themes are introduced without explicit discussion or justification, further research can be pursued in the first instance by reading Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955); Harold Bloom, *The Italian Renaissance*. (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004); Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); and Roberto Weiss, *The Spread of Italian Humanism*. (London: Hutchinson, 1964).

^{xlv} Albertino Mussato, *Sette Libri Inediti Del De Gestis Italicorum Post Henricum Vii*, ed. Luigi Padrin (Italy: Nabu, 2013); Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, ed. Charles Osgood (London: Literary Licensing, 2011); Coluccio Salutati, *De Laboribus Herculis*, ed. Berthold Ullman (Zurich: Thesaurus Mundi, 1952); Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Gaponigri (London: Regnery, 1996).

^{xlvi} Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie Walker (London: Penguin, 2000).

^{xlvii} Giambattista Vico, *New Science of Giambattista Vico: Unabridged Translation of the Third Edition (1744) With the Addition of "Practic of the New Science,"* trans. Thomas Bergin & Max Fisch (London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

^{xlviii} Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 56.

^{xlix} Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: World's Classics, 2009); Georg Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ¶¶582-595.

ⁱ Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 12. To further evidence this point, see the reading of framed democracies and Kagan in *ibid.*, ch. 2). The claim is that any instability in governance is to be undone by the militaristic intervention of liberal powers.

^{li} Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 1.

^{lii} Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 33.

^{liii} Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 5-6.

^{liv} Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 14-15.

^{lv} *Ibid.*, 15.

^{lvi} *Ibid.*, 18.

^{lvii} Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 27-28.

^{lviii} Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 130-139.

^{lix} Evidence for the claim can be found in the attempt by Valgenti's discussion of Payerson's understanding of Vico's claim that imagination is a faculty of knowing and its relation to a universal common sense. It is then a small step to show how the reading of Gadamer attributed to Payerson may have had an influence of Vattimo's understanding of the German tradition and how this was a product of Vico's influence on Payerson.

^{lx} Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); Gianni Vattimo, *Il Soggetto e La Maschera: Nietzsche e Il Problema Della Liberazione* (Milano: Bompiani, 1974).

^{lxi} Consider also these words: "Metaphysical democracy is a system sustained by those who find themselves at ease within its order of facts, norms, and institutions. These are the winners, those who believe Being's presence is worthy not only of description but also of contemplation and conservation, since it guarantees their own condition. But such a condition inevitably also includes the defeated history, that is, the oblivion of 'Being' and the 'weak'" (Vattimo & Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 38) For all my commitment to philosophical idealism or irrationalism, there is an "oh so English" part of me that always goes Samuel Johnson and harks back to a simple empiricism: let me touch it, see it, that must be always the ultimate proof.